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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 HILLAH 000039

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DEPT FOR NEA/EX, DS/IP/NEA, AND DS/ITA  
BAGHDAD FOR MGT, RSO, AND NCT

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TAGS: [ASEC](#) [AEMR](#) [AMGT](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: MEETING OF REO AL-HILLAH EMERGENCY ACTION COMMITTEE (EAC)

REF: 05 AL-HILLAH 0301

CLASSIFIED BY: Alfred Fonteneau, RC, REO Al Hillah, Department  
of State.

REASON: 1.4 (c), (g)

¶1. (C) Summary: The REO Al-Hillah EAC was convened on 1 March 2006. It was chaired by the Regional Coordinator, and in attendance were representatives from RSO, POL, PRT, USAID, KBR, and ORA. The REOs US Army LNO and the 2/4 BCT S-9 were also present, and advised on the posture of Coalition forces in the region. This meeting was called after REO management learned of an impending closure of FOB Charlie in Al-Hillah. The scheduled date for full removal of Coalition forces is currently set at 31 May, despite the concerns previously forwarded in the reference.

The reference, dated 19 October 2005, set forth an EAC assessment of the impact FOB Charlie's closure will have on the REO's operations. The EAC reviewed the ramifications of the newly revised closure plan, focusing on the security requirements necessary to maintain the REO's existing location and operational posture. A summary of the findings is set forth herein. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Details: REO Al-Hillah was established in close proximity to FOB Charlie out of necessity, with the FOB providing the REO with essential security and logistical services. The operational environment in the South Central region remains non-permissive, and this necessity remains. Because the FOB's proposed closure is due to circumstances beyond the control of the REO, the continuation of REO operations is fully contingent on the future provision of those services currently fulfilled by FOB Charlie. This reality exists regardless of existing FOB closure plans. As previously stated in the reference, REO Al-Hillah's future viability will depend on the continuation or replacement of the essential security functions that the FOB provides to our diplomatic activities such as QRF, safehaven, and an active presence in our vicinity, in addition to basic logistical services. It should also be noted that the other three REOs in Iraq are either located on or adjacent to Coalition bases, for good reason. A closure of FOB Charlie would put REO Al-Hillah in a uniquely vulnerable position, further exacerbated by the absence of an improvement in key facets of the security environment in South Central Iraq. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that one of the most active combat zones in Iraq is located in Northern Babil Province, a mere 20 miles from Al-Hillah.

¶3. (C) The presence of a Coalition base alongside the REO has been continuous to date, and the EAC believes that its stabilizing effect on the area has been critical. Both its function as a deterrent to hostile activity in the area, and the defense in depth provided by Coalition combat patrols operating out of the FOB are essential elements to the REO's current

security posture. Without active patrolling in our AO, chokepoints, key intersections, and MSRs can become easy targets for IED emplacement. Hostile forces could operate in the vicinity with virtual impunity, especially during the hours of darkness. The IED threat in this region is also well documented, and the REO's operational tempo remains high. Overland travel is a necessity in the absence of dedicated air assets, and choice of routes to and from the provinces is very limited. Existing combat patrols also clearly deserve much of the credit for the infrequency and abbreviated nature of indirect fire attacks conducted against the REO to date. Without fear of immediate reprisal, these attacks could become extended in nature, with observers located on vantage points around the REO adjusting fire onto key locations of the compound.

14. (C) The REO's small footprint makes the requirement for a QRF a fundamental one in the existing threat environment. Potential external threats to the compound are numerous, and the current 5 - 15 minute response capability provided by the US Army Armored Cavalry Squadron currently stationed at FOB C is critical. Without this external capability, worst case scenarios could include both points of egress from the compound being sealed off by outside forces, or external direct or indirect fire attacks continuing unabated. Historical examples in both Najaf and Al-Kut (CPA facilities) demonstrate how a rapidly deteriorating security situation can leave a small facility isolated and untenable. Even if FOB Charlie was turned over to the ISF, an accessible safehaven for REO personnel would cease to exist if these forces lost control of a deteriorating situation or became unwilling to fight. The size of the REO compound and correspondingly few landing zones dictate that an air evacuation would take an inordinate amount of time and successive sorties. This leaves overland evacuation as the only option in the event a short-fuzed drawdown of the REO becomes required. Such an action would be impossible without a Coalition FOB in the area, especially given existing limitations

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on vehicular resources at the REO. Even with a reaction force on 24-hour standby, the most optimistic estimate on moving a HMMWV-mobile unit from the next closest military installation (FOB Kalsu) during hours of darkness would be 45 minutes.

15. (S) The proliferation and strengthening of armed militias in South Central Iraq poses potentially serious consequences. Although the US Army MSC at FOB Charlie assesses the Iraqi Police and Iraqi National Guard in Al-Hillah as the most capable forces of their kind in the South Central region, the REO EAC remains concerned because historically, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) throughout the region have displayed an inability or an unwillingness to consistently confront armed militia groups. Compounding this issue, most Police forces in the region are now thoroughly penetrated by those seeking to further the influence of religious parties and militias, such as JAM and Badr Corps. Al-Hillah remains the only major city in the area with a police force that cannot be considered corrupted by outside influences, due in no small part to the leadership of General Qaise Hamsa. An ongoing and concerted effort by the Babil Provincial Council to remove General Qaise continues, for this very reason, and it is highly improbable that he will be able to retain his position indefinitely. The Babil Governor also recently initiated an attempt to move the Hillah SWAT team to Ministry of Defense (MOD) control. The US Army MSC in the area assesses this as an attempt to relocate this effective and independent unit to another area, at which time the Governor would backfill the unit with personnel loyal to him and SCIRI; the Governor's pro-Iranian inclinations are well documented. Factors such as these combine to cast serious doubt on the future viability and effectiveness of the Iraqi Police in the area. With the closure of FOB Charlie, the local police force will no longer have the benefit of backup and moral support afforded by Coalition Forces stationed in the area.

16. (S) The expansion of Iranian influence throughout the South Central region also carries with it dangerous implications that should not be ignored. DS/ITA recently forwarded an

intelligence report, dated 3/3/06, confirming widespread arming of Mahdi Militia (JAM) members by the Iranian government. This is only the latest addition to the ever-increasing compilation of anecdotal and actual evidence, pointing to hostile Iranian activity in the South of Iraq. The effective use of surrogates by Iran is well documented, especially in the case of Hezbollah in Lebanon and elsewhere; the danger posed by a similar scenario could have wider implications to US diplomatic activities in the region if US-Iranian relations further deteriorate over the looming nuclear crisis. Intelligence reporting indicates that JAM has threatened to attack US interests if the US undertakes actions to curb Iran's nuclear program.

17. (C) REO management was recently informed of a proposal to base approximately 120 military personnel on the REO, in an attempt to counter-balance the removal of Coalition forces from FOB Charlie. It has been proposed that these troops would be dedicated to training and mentoring Iraqi Police and military units, and would not act as a dedicated security force for the compound. The EAC believes that although this plus up in combat capable personnel could theoretically augment the capacity to blunt some forms of hostile action directed at the REO for a longer period of time, it does replace the capabilities provided by a local QRF. Because of the small size of the REO compound, a collocated military force could be rendered only marginally effective or ineffective by virtue of proximity to a security incident or hostile action directed at the REO compound. Examples of this would be concentrated indirect fire along the compound's axis or coordinated attacks at the compound's two egress points, both of which could require intervention from outside the compound. The 120 additional personnel could help to provide a marginal presence in the Al-Hillah area through joint combat patrols with ISF counterparts. It must also be realized however, that this would represent a significant reduction in the current capacity, because to date this function has been carried out by a battalion-sized Coalition force. Operation of military forces off the REO will also raise the profile of the compound, making it not only a diplomatic facility but by some measure a military installation as well. This could possibly lead to increased targeting of the REO by hostile elements.

18. (C) The proposed basing of troops on the REO also poses certain logistical problems. First and foremost, little usable space remains on the compound. The one open area not currently dedicated is overlooked by a vehicle overpass; to date this area has been deemed unsuitable for housing COM personnel, for this very reason. A survey by MNFI force protection experts would be required to determine if this area could be made usable to billet MNFI personnel through emplacement of 20 foot T-walls or similar defensive items. Additionally, space constraints dictate that the REO is unable to accommodate a large increase

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in personnel in the current configuration. Due to an influx of personnel for the PRT, there are currently no additional billeting spaces available. Should the decision be made to add personnel and vehicles to the REO, the following must be taken into consideration:

- Additional office and billeting space would have to be made available, in amounts proportionate to any planned increase in REO occupancy.
- Parking for additional vehicles is virtually non-existent.
- No maintenance ability for military vehicles exists at the REO.
- TO-100 would have to be modified to support the increase in personnel. Depending on the number of personnel, additional support facilities would have to be constructed (DFAC, laundry, etc.)

The current FRAGO with the 1/10 Cavalry based at Camp Charlie provides escort for all PWC (food) and equipment delivered to the REO. Loss of this support would necessitate implementing another FRAGO to provide bi-weekly escort to and from Scania or

another location, to include immediate escort return, due to a lack of parking on the compound for extended stays of semi-trucks/trailers. FRAGO would also have to include provision for outgoing mail and financial service support/escort on a bi-monthly basis.

¶9. (U) REO Al-Hillah can facilitate an agreement with landowners for space on the REO compound, in the event the security concerns for the location next to the overpass could be addressed. Past experience dictates however, that the time line being considered for construction of the proposed camp to house the additional troops is overly optimistic. As there are no other billeting options available at the REO, a more realistic schedule for FOB Charlie's closure would need to be considered.

¶10. (C) While the EAC believes the relocation of 120 troops to the REO compound is preferable to a complete withdrawal of all Coalition forces in the area, this concept does not truly address the problem at hand. The previously discussed factors combine to make it problematic at best, and its implementation would be accompanied by the automatic assumption of a significant amount of increased risk. Moving the REO to collocate with Coalition Forces at another FOB in the region is an option that could potentially be viable, in spite of the fact that the closest such installation to FOB Charlie is FOB Duke - also slated for closure in the near future.

¶11. (C) Conclusion: To date, local Coalition Forces have facilitated the conduct of diplomacy in the midst of a war zone, with a minimum margin of safety, by fulfilling the critical functions outlined above. The EAC is unanimous in its belief that in order for the REO to truly operate safely in the current threat environment, Coalition Forces at their current level should remain in close proximity to the REO to provide the necessary continuing presence, as well as ORF and safe haven functions. In the absence of a distinct improvement in the security situation in South Central Iraq, any exception to this standard would automatically entail a proportionate increase in the risk posed to our operations. All EAC members also believe that a full reliance on Iraqi security forces at the present time poses an unacceptable level of risk to US civilian personnel at the REO. REO Al-Hillah would "find out the hard way" if local ISF were not up to the task, and the consequence could be nothing less than needless loss of lives. If maintaining diplomatic engagement in South Central Iraq is to remain a USG priority, then appropriately providing for the safe conduct of this activity should be a concurrent and equally important USG priority. The importance of this tenant is underscored because USG engagement has recently been expanded with the activation of the Babil Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT). The overall success or failure of this initiative (to include planned PRTs dedicated to Karbala and Najaf, with proposed future collocation at REO Al-Hillah in some cases) will be heavily dependent on the nature of the local security environment. The Al-Hillah EAC believes that MNFI base closure plans should be adjusted to reflect this reality, and to support the broader USG agenda in this region.

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